

SOME NOTES ON THE GENUS *PHYLLOSCOPUS* IN KASHMIR.

BY

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I was in the Liddar Valley, Kashmir, from June 12th to July 4th, 1949, with Pahlgam (7,000 feet above sea-level) as base. All my observations were made between that height and 10,000 feet, apart from brief excursions higher and lower.

The phylloscopi have always interested me, and I have spent many hours standing trying to get satisfactory views of these tiny birds as they flit about in trees or bushes, and much oftener failing than succeeding. The notes that follow must only be regarded as a first essay (as far as I am concerned at least) on Kashmir phylloscopi. It will be seen that I am by no means clear about the status, even in this limited area, of several species. Ticehurst, in his excellent monograph of the genus, warns his readers against field identifications. This warning should be taken to heart, and the field observer should always either present his evidence for identifications, or should only give his identifications as tentative. On the other hand, the observer today has the inestimable advantage of Ticehurst's book to help him. I never go on a holiday in India without it, and even when I leave it behind when out on a day or two's trek, I generally regret its absence.

In what follows, I try to deal with the species observed in order of their size, beginning with the largest. In general it may be said that the main divisions of the genus, from the point of view of the field observer, are four: first, large or long-tailed species with no wing-bar; secondly, large species with a wing-bar; thirdly, small or short-tailed species with no wing-bar; fourthly, small species with a wing-bar or wing-bars. All four types are represented in Kashmir. I do not follow the sub-divisions in the above order in what follows. The three long-tailed species with no wing-bar are all smaller than the two with wing-bars, so I take the latter first. On the other hand, the only small species without a wing-bar is slightly larger than those with wing-bars, so here I take it first.

Phylloscopus magnirostris.

This species, the largest of all Indian phylloscopi, is common in the Liddar Valley. Once you have learnt its very distinctive song, which apparently is hardly subject to any variation, its presence is easily detected. The song is a clear bell-like cadence of five notes: 'twee—ti-ti tu-tu'. The call-note is of the same character, a double note, the second note much higher than the first. I noted between forty or fifty of them, nearly always close to running water. It is a strictly arboreal bird. I think I only three times saw one come down to within ten feet of the ground, and I never got wholly satisfactory views of them. The rather broad and dark bill is a useful character. There is one pale wing-bar at the tips of the wing-coverts, but it is difficult to see.

Phylloscopus occipitalis.

This is by far the commonest species of the genus in Kashmir indeed, I think it is the commonest bird of any kind in the Liddar Valley. It occurs from 6,000 feet upwards, wherever there are trees. Its various songs and call-notes seem to form almost exactly the same repertoire as that possessed by the European Coal Tit, but I fear that may not be much help to Indian ornithologists. The commonest of these notes, apparently the song, is a constantly repeated, cheerful, rapid, *chi-wee, chi-wee*, etc. Sometimes it is reversed, with the emphasis on the *wee*: *wee-chi, wee-chi*, etc. This species has one or two fairly distinct wing-bars, but it is the markings on its head that are diagnostic. The dark bands above the eye-stripe and through the eye are often very strongly marked, contrasting with the long yellowish eye-stripe between them. The usual English name for the bird, 'Crowned Willow-Warbler', is given it because of the pale coronal streak, greeny-yellow, somewhat variable in intensity, running from the bill over the top of the head to the nape. Another good field character is the orange base of the bill. This feature, adjoining the beginning of the yellow superciliary stripe, and a yellowish throat, gives the bird a decidedly yellow appearance about the face, in marked contrast to the last species.

Phylloscopus tytleri.

This bird is somewhat smaller than the last two, but it belongs, with them, to the species having reasonably long tails. It has no wing-bar. I only saw a few, and it was some time before I identified them satisfactorily, as they were browner than I had expected. Indeed, I think the field observer may be pardoned for thinking, when he first sees them in Kashmir, that he is watching a Siberian Chiffchaff. The first that I saw at close quarters, in low bushes, was carrying food, so it may have had a nest nearby. I only once heard the song: *whittle-di-wee-you* was the way I syllabified it. After watching several at very close range I described them as rather dull brown all over the upper-parts, the tail showing a trace of rufous or fulvous on the edges of the feathers. The wing-quills seemed to show a very faint trace of greenish, but only very faint. In the hand, the very narrow bill is a good character, but I did not notice this in the birds I saw. Perhaps I should have noticed it with more extensive observation.

Phylloscopus affinis.

On June 30th, in juniper scrub at about 10,000 feet, I saw one of these, and probably a second half a mile from it. It is very easy to identify, being uniform brown above and bright, almost canary, yellow below. At altitudes above 10,000 feet it is probably common.

Phylloscopus griseolus.

On June 18th I saw what appeared to be a bird of this species at the edge of some woodland about 8,500 feet, above Pahlgam. If the identification was correct, it was presumably a bird of passage or a wanderer. It is not difficult to identify, as its upper plumage

is a peculiar grey-brown, and its under-parts are oily yellow. It has no wing-bar. In its winter quarters, in Indian jungle, it is fond of hopping about the boles of big trees, and usually keeps near the ground, associating with other small birds.

Phylloscopus neglectus.

This is a short-tailed species without the least trace of a wing-bar. Indeed, I believe it is the only one in the whole genus that combines a short tail with absence of wing-bar. Ticehurst could not trace a single specimen from Kashmir. It appeared to me to be one of the commoner species, so I must present my evidence. On June 22nd and 23rd I came on small parties, the first near Pahlgam not much above 7,000 feet, the second at Lidderwat, at over 9,000 feet. In both cases they were feeding in low scrub near the main Liddar stream, and they were absurdly tame, but extremely skulking, so that I sometimes saw them at barely six feet distance from my eyes, and below me, but only for a split moment, except once or twice when two chased. However, subsequently, on June 28th, 29th and 30th and again on July 3rd, I saw others, latterly singly or in pairs, which were sometimes as polite to the observer as any *Phylloscopus* ever knows how to be. That is to say, I saw individuals at close quarters, below me, which stayed in one spot, in full view, for at least five seconds.

The first I saw were more or less in company with the first *P. tytleri* that I saw, and as both species are brown above and dirty white below without any wing-bar, this caused me some confusion. Happily, this got disentangled later. I had to make up my mind why I was certain that these small brown phylloscopi were not Chiffchaffs. From the first day, my first and most decisive answer was, 'the short tail'. Perhaps it will be sufficient if I quote what I wrote after the final observation on July 3rd. 'My last observation, to-day, is the most satisfactory of all. I was exploring the scrub and boulders of a "marg" about 9,000 feet up, and heard a little three-note song, *ti-wish-i*, in some bushes to my left and below me. Soon I saw a *P. neglectus*, and it was under close observation for the next ten minutes, showing itself on top of bushes from time to time, and sometimes coming within ten feet of me, and all the time below me. It was mostly silent. Then I heard a very faint *peep* behind me, and presently a second bird appeared. The first, in response to the gentle "peeping", came up the hill and fed it, while the second bird shivered its wings. The first then sang several times, there was a little chasing and then they separated again, and I only saw the male. Had the female (for I feel confident it was the mate, not a young bird) come off the nest?—or were they courting? As to colour, I have not much to add [to what I had written in my notes on earlier days.] Plain brown is the colour of the body feathers, from crown to tail. There is no suggestion of a wing-bar. In certain lights the wing-quills and the tail-feathers look slightly fulvous, in others almost olive-green; possibly they reflect a somewhat different colour at different angles. (The birds were seen in bright sunshine at just about noon). The under-parts show no trace of yellow, but are decidedly streaky. I still have no very satisfactory account of the

colours of the soft parts. I should say: Eye nearly black, bill brown, legs rather pale brown. The pale superciliary extends a little behind the eye, but is much shorter than in most *phylloscopi*'.

It will be seen that my evidence suggests that birds of this species were appearing in small parties in the Liddar Valley in mid-June, and beginning to nest there, at heights between 7,000 and 9,000 feet, by the end of the month.

Those in parties were mostly silent, but I occasionally heard a sharp *chip* note, and in chasing one uttered a double *chi-ip*.

***Phylloscopus reguloides*.**

Now we come to what, in Kashmir at least, is the most difficult group, namely the small *phylloscopi* with wing-bars. Here my information is certainly very incomplete, even for the area in which I was observing. *P. reguloides* is the greenest of this group, its upper plumage appearing a rather bright green, or yellow-green, when it is seen at close quarters. Also, it has a pale occipital streak. I notice that Sálim Ali, in his new book on 'Indian Hill Birds' describes it as the Kashmir Crowned Willow-Warbler. I am afraid this strikes me as an unfortunate name, since the ordinary Crowned Willow-Warbler (*P. occipitalis*) must outnumber it in Kashmir by a hundred to one. But if the word 'Small' were added, it would emphasise the fact that this species, like that, has a pale occipital stripe. This, together with its short tail and greenish upper-parts, should suffice to identify it under favourable conditions. On June 25th I had a close view of one, and a few days later I saw some in a mixed party, but those are all I was sure of, and it appeared to me to be a rather scarce species.

***Phylloscopus inornatus humei*.**

I do not favour the use of trinomials by field observers, as the use of the subspecific name is normally a mere assumption based on what is written in books. It is rarely possible to distinguish one subspecies from another in the field. But in this case, not only is the form of the so-called Yellow-browed Warbler that occurs all over India (except in the extreme north-east) known to be *humei*, but also it is in fact paler and less yellow than *P. i. inornatus*, so that it is not impossible to distinguish. This is alleged to be one of the commoner species in Kashmir at the altitudes I was exploring. My experience suggests otherwise. I only twice heard its very distinctive double call-note, *tiss-yip*, which one can hear almost any day in the gardens of New Delhi in the winter; apart from this I only saw it for certain on two or three occasions in mixed parties of small birds in the woods.

***Phylloscopus pulcher*.**

On June 27th, following a heavy downpour of rain, I found a remarkable concourse of small birds, flycatchers, tits, warblers, etc., in the scrub close to the Forest Rest-House at Pahlgam. Twice, while I stood watching, a bird of this species appeared, its orange wing-bands instantly marking it out. On one, I also caught a

glimpse of the white in the tail-feathers, a feature that is hardly found in any other Indian *Phylloscopus*, though it is characteristic of course of the Grey-headed Flycatcher-Warbler, of the nearly related genus *Seicercus*. This bird, by the way, so common at most hill stations in the Himalayas, I did not see in Kashmir.

Phylloscopus proregulus.

This, the smallest Indian *Phylloscopus*, appeared to me to be the most abundant after *P. occipitalis*. Its song is weak, a rapid, rather unmusical, feeble trill, suggesting a *Regulus*. The call-notes I heard included a rather flat *chi-wee*, and, near the nest, a plaintive *twee*. It is readily distinguished by the lemon-yellow coloured rump, often visible when the bird hovers, goldcrest-like, to pick insects off the foliage of the pine trees. When this cannot be seen, the yellowish wing-bars and superciliary streak and occipital streak, the latter rather variable, should help in identification. The general plumage is browner than that of the other small wing-barred phylloscopi of Kashmir.

It must not be forgotten that the Goldcrest, *Regulus cristatus*, is also common in Kashmir. Its general plumage is olive-green. There is a single pale wing-bar and a second pale bar at right angles to it. The occipital stripe is orange or yellow, except in the young birds, which lack this feature. And at the sides of the crown there runs a black line. But below this, the whole face is uniform greenish, with no pale superciliary stripe, and no dark eye-strip, features which are characteristic, in varying degree, of every *Phylloscopus* known to me.

At least four species of *Phylloscopus* may occur at higher elevations in parts of Kashmir which I did not visit. These are *P. collybita lorenzii*, *P. trochiloides*, *P. subviridis* and *P. maculipennis*.